

The War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley

ALLAN S. EVEREST

Wm. D. Foy
1813

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ALLAN S. EVEREST, Professor of History at SUNY Plattsburgh, is the author of *Moses Hazen and the Canadian Refugees in the American Revolution*, *Our North Country Heritage*, and *Rum Across the Border: The Prohibition Era in Northern New York*. He has also written articles for *New York History* and *Vermont History*.

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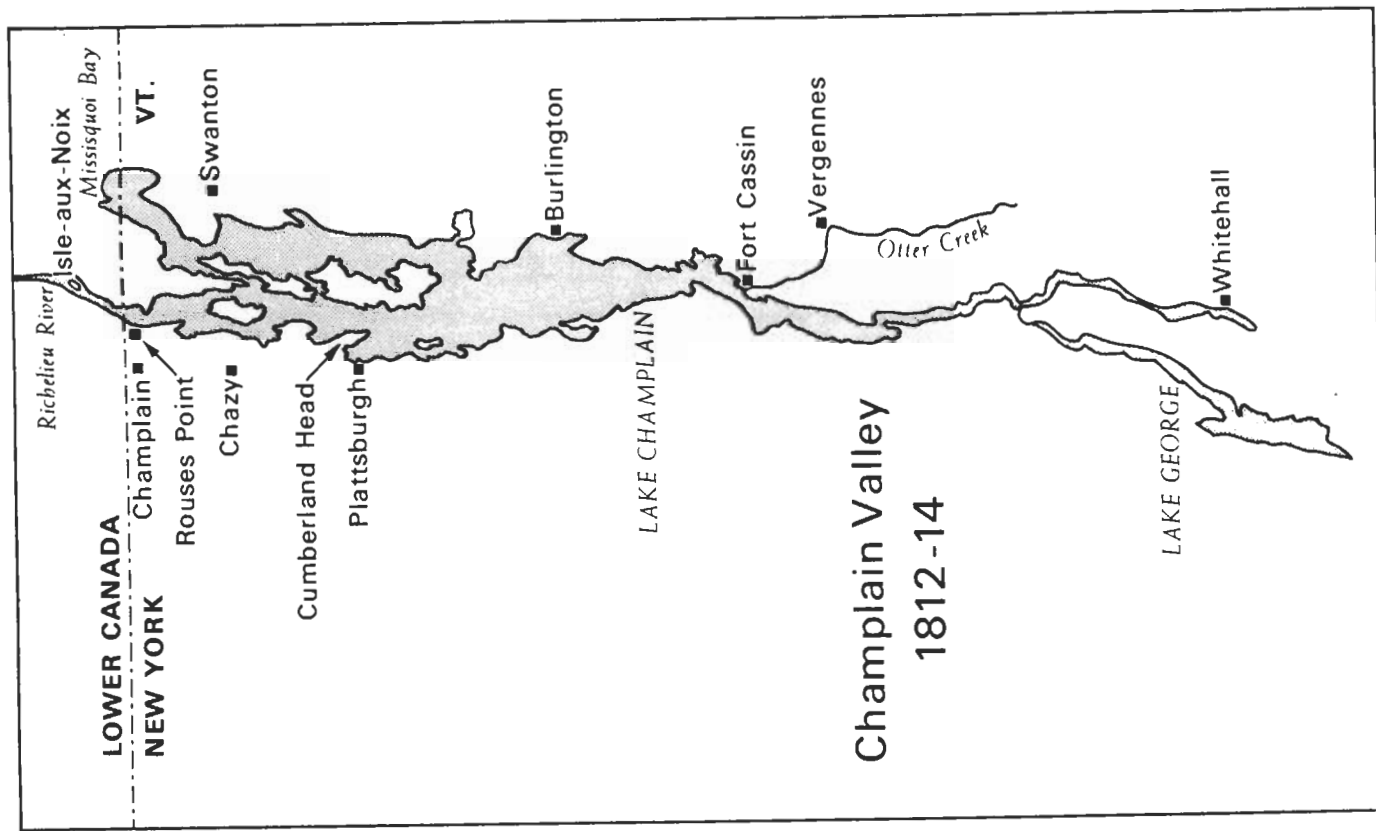
strengthen their claims by constructing fortresses. In 1731 they erected a stockaded fort at Chimney Point which they subsequently moved to Crown Point, where Fort St. Frédéric was built of stone. From there they were able to dominate the lake and negate British claims which were backed only by a fort on the upper Hudson River. In 1755 the French further affirmed their dominion by starting the construction of Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga), which commanded the carrying place from Lake Champlain to Lake George.

The last of the great French-British wars (1754-63) was waged intensively in the Champlain Valley. The struggle involved such notable personalities as Montcalm for the French and Robert Rogers and General Jeffrey Amherst for the British. In 1759 Amherst succeeded in driving the French from both Forts Carillon and St. Frédéric. Although he could repair the partial French destruction at Carillon, the more complete demolition at St. Frédéric persuaded Amherst to build a new fort at Crown Point. He also ordered the construction of the military Crown Point Road across the Green Mountains to the lower Connecticut Valley. Montreal fell to the British in 1760, and the war in North America came to a close, although fighting elsewhere and protracted peace negotiations postponed a treaty of peace until 1763. One of its major terms was the British acquisition of all of Canada, together with French claims to the Champlain Valley.

Even before the signing of the treaty, but after the collapse of French Canada, Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire resumed a practice he had started before the war of granting townships on the east side of what is now Vermont. He believed that the entire area between the Connecticut River and Lake Champlain belonged to New Hampshire by the none-too-clear terms of its original charter. Encouraged by the pressure for new lands for the overflowing farm population of southern New England, whose appetite had been whetted by the accounts their veterans brought back from the war, and driven by his own cupidity for the lands he could reserve to himself with each grant, he started handing out townships with a free hand. Between 1761 and 1764, he dispensed 114 of them, some along Lake Champlain, to groups of speculating proprietors in southern New England. For example, in 1761 he chartered the towns of Addison, Bridport, Middlebury, New Haven, Salisbury, and Shoreham. He continued the next year with Charlotte and Ferrisburg. In 1763 it was Burlington, Colchester, Orwell, and Shelburne.

Few of the proprietors came to their lands. Instead, they peddled them to jobbers who passed them on to retailers, who advertised and created markets for hundreds of family-sized farms. By the mid-1760s, trickles of settlers had begun to arrive along the east shore of the lake.

Meanwhile, the Wentworth pretensions were challenged by the colony of New York, which likewise thought its original charter to the duke of York



eight of "the uneasy and troublesome ones" at St. Regis, together with the names of two chiefs who had joined the British. Colonel Louis stayed at the Mooers home. He needed clothing, which Mooers did not possess, and Mooers took the colonel to Bloomfield, who asked Mooers to supply the chief with the customary clothing and bill it to the assistant deputy quartermaster.

Bit by bit an American Indian policy was developed. One of its important ingredients was the rations distributed at French Mills which by December supplied 434 Indians. The chiefs usually came most often because periodically they received cash bonuses averaging \$50 at a time, often distributed by Williams. In October, some Caughnawaga chiefs appeared before the Vermont legislature with land claims for which they requested annual payments. The legislature declined but voted \$100 for presents and \$100 for the expenses of the chiefs' trip.

In the fall, the British violated the prewar agreements by placing an armed band at St. Regis. A small detachment of American militia, using the detailed intelligence of the Corps of Observation, surrounded and captured the British force, including the first flag of the war. The British retaliated by a similar raid in which they captured Tilden and his company at French Mills. The two groups were exchanged in December. This was the only military clash in the East that arose solely out of Indian affairs.

Although supervision of all Indian relations was maintained by Dearborn at Greenbush, much of the on-the-spot work was conducted by General Mooers. After Dearborn's feckless incursion into Canada in November, he assigned to Mooers the care of all Indians in the United States on the borders of Canada between the St. Lawrence and Lake Champlain. He was to supply and pay them as agents, pay three Caughnawaga chiefs \$50 each, and supervise the work of Eleazer Williams, who was "not to be absent without your explicit permission."¹¹ Mooers acquired a number of perplexing problems with his new authority. He coordinated the work of the Rangers with the demands of the army commanders, oversaw the rationing system and certified and found payment for the bills of the Indian service. One of his assignments was to put the St. Regis Indians who collected rations to the work of making snowshoes for the army.

He also had problems with the food rationing system at French Mills.

During the winter of 1812-13, contractor W. Hastings was in charge and he complained to Mooers about the local militia commander, Captain David Erwin, who handled the actual distribution of the rations. According to Hastings, Erwin was extravagant in his issues. Mooers warned Erwin against issuing unnecessary rations, especially to any Indians who had not put themselves under American protection. He was also to avoid issuing large amounts of grain for seed. Subsequently, Erwin charged that some Indians sold the ra-

Oneidas. During his war service, he was tormented by conscientious scruples against war and violence; throughout the period he prayed for peace, and he consistently refused to bear arms until the battle of Plattsburgh.

Dearborn's commission to Williams on August 5 offered \$400 a year and two rations a day, and extra expenses for necessary travels. Dearborn also promised to help him further his education during the winter. In return he expected "perfect attention," "most ridged punctuality and integrity," "caution and prudence," and accounts to be "correctly kept and exhibited when required." On August 6, Williams departed by horse for Burlington with a letter of introduction to Colonel Clark, and another for Mooers at Plattsburgh. The latter instructed Mooers to furnish Williams with a horse and anything else he needed, again urged "the most perfect secrecy," and for the first time opened the way to American generosity to the Indians: "If any of these people should be disposed to come within our lines, they should be treated in a friendly manner, and supplied with rations."¹⁰

Mooers supplied him with a special passport for Franklin County and a letter to Captain Tilden at Constable. He acquainted himself with the country, met some of the Indians, and began to put together his team of "Rangers," Indian and white, including his brother John, who operated secretly under his direction. On August 24, he went to Albany and stayed up all night reporting to Dearborn. His conscience still bothered him and his journal carries the notation "Oh! That God would make all men peaceful and live together in unity." Nevertheless, he performed a very valuable service. He reported to Dearborn and Governor Thompson; he conferred with, and undertook missions for, Generals Mooers, Bloomfield, Wilkinson, Hampton, Izard, Macomb, and Lieutenant Macdonough.

From his meeting with Dearborn, Williams went north to Whitehall where he first met General Bloomfield. After the general arrived in Plattsburgh on September 9, Williams told him about the work of the Corps of Observation. Then he rejoined Tilden for a secret conference at French Mills with some St. Regis chiefs. Tilden harangued them, gave them money and obtained their promises of help for the American cause. Williams' conscience bothered him about the propriety of detaching British Indians from allegiance to their own government. After consultation with Bloomfield he decided that it was necessary. Shortly thereafter he took two of the chiefs to Albany to be wine and dined by the governor. Yet he realistically admitted that the Canadian Indians, regardless of their protestations, were not to be relied on.

In the middle of September, three loyal St. Regis chiefs, signing their letter with an "x," sent their brother chief, Colonel Louis Cook, to Mooers with a statement of their loyalty. As evidence they appended a list of forty-

tions and used the money to buy liquor. They got drunk, and one was jailed in Malone for drawing a knife.¹²

At an Indian council in 1813 which included many Indians from Canada, Erwin reported that they wanted to continue their policy of neutrality. There were 72 war enthusiasts, but "to lose the friend ship of 350 neutral Indians for the service of 72 compels to serve I can not think as be good policy. I have conversed with the principal inhabitants and I am convinced that it would make this country a frontier."¹³

In May of the second year of the war, the Rangers received an increase in pay "to encourage them in their fidelity," as Williams described it. Williams' own bill after a year's service was \$591.40. Besides his expenses it included pay at \$400 and two rations at twenty cents each. It was not fully documented because Williams had lost some of his papers during Murray's raid on Plattsburgh. General Izard in 1814 suspected that some Rangers were also in the pay of the British. He temporarily stopped their monthly stipends and gave them notice that in the future their reward would be proportionate to the value of their services. No evidence exists to support his suspicions, nor do any of Moore's papers show that he ever challenged any of the bills growing out of the Indian Service.

On the contrary, he interceded with some commanders in order to get them paid. One of his special pleadings, to the inspector general, was on behalf of Thomas Williams, the father of Eleazer, who had helped to keep the Caughnawaga Indians neutral but had consequently lost favor with the British. Thomas came into the States, and Mooers asked for a suitable reward because father and son had "done much good by their timely and repeated interference with the hostile Indians which has probably prevented depredations on the inhabitants of our Frontier is I believe unquestionable." Thomas appealed to the War Department for rations for himself and his family during the last summer of the war; he obtained them but the record is not clear how and where he did so.¹⁴

The role of Eleazer Williams, as it finally evolved, was to gather information and to keep the Indians at peace. Concerning his Rangers, he recorded that

No movement made by the enemy but is known to them. The lives and liberties of the greatest personages among the enemy are often within their grasp and at the mercy of this secret corps of observation. Always in motion and activity, ready to execute the order of the government however delicate and dangerous the nature of it may be. . . . No appeal can be made from it. They are constantly exposed to martial law and to death. Their courage, bravery and fidelity save them — the war department often praises their daring conduct, and rewards their services with high wages.

Understandably proud of his outfit, he also had the satisfaction of knowing that he was considered dangerous in Canada, and that a reward was offered for his capture. If that happened, he instructed his Rangers "to take and make prisoners of as many as it may be in their power of the high officers of the British army — Gen'l Prevost if possible."¹⁵

The Corps of Observation was pitted against British agents, who had the disadvantage of not being highly organized. After five months of war, Prevost reported having spent only £101 on the secret service of the government. Williams was fortunate in not losing any of his important agents to the British, for he knew the threat to his entire organization: "If my men are once detected they are lost." Occasionally his Rangers captured enemy agents. In 1813 one William Baker was caught and turned over to the army for disposition. After questioning, he admitted that he was a sergeant in the British 103rd Regiment. He was hanged on March 26, 1814, in the presence of the whole army. In July 1814, another was captured and induced to confess. He divulged the names of Americans, some of them smugglers from New England, who supplied the British with information about the American position and strength. He also revealed the names of British agents; the Rangers were alerted to watch for all of them. The competition for Indian loyalty ended only with the termination of the war. The accounts of some of Eleazer Williams' missions and the credit he merited for timely information are reserved for the appropriate place in the chronology of the war.

Furs

The central figure in the wartime fur trade was John Jacob Astor, but to achieve that preeminence he broke into the fur business of the Great Lakes area. This trade had been dominated by a British company whose center had been Fort Michilimackinac on Mackinac Island off the northern peninsula of Michigan, until Jay's Treaty forced a move to St. Joseph's, a Canadian island near the north shore of Lake Huron.

Before the war Astor was laying the groundwork for his vast empire. He sold quantities of furs in Europe and bought most of his Indian trade goods there. Finding British competition intolerable, he and William McGillivray, a partner in other British fur companies, formed the South West Company. It was designed to avoid destructive competition, and its sphere of influence included all the fur-trading posts in the Great Lakes area. Astor was to receive half of the profits of the firm.¹⁶

The South West Fur Company was a hedge against war or the closing of

Davis and a detachment arrived in Champlain on June 20, but they were withdrawn on July 14, and this time the Champlain Committee of Safety protested directly to the commander in Burlington.

Aside from the exposed border and the fears it engendered, the old problem of smuggling into Canada continued to harass military and civilian officers charged with enforcing the laws. In June, Macdonough reported that many cattle and provisions were going into Canada from Vermont, usually after dark, and that rafts of timber and spars were going to Isle-aux-Noix to feed the shipbuilding industry there. At the end of the summer Captain Erwin at French Mills begged Mooers for more troops before the whole countryside was bare of provisions. He reported that a Canadian agent was there, openly contracting for supplies, and that a drove of cattle from Cornwall, Vermont, had just gone through the area. As he quainly put it, "The host of smugglers that huver on our lines is beyond description. Since the first of August to this date their has been from the best calculation more than sixty yolk of oxen besides other beef cattle drove to Canada."⁹

Macdonough decided to try to check smuggling on the lake, as well as to halt the depredations of British gunboats along the line. After a strenuous winter in which he increased the firepower of his three vessels and two gunboats, he emerged from winter quarters as the master of the lake. He had experienced great difficulty in getting the guns and ships' supplies from distant points, but he never obtained the trained seamen he needed. His request in January was repeated many times thereafter: "There are no men to get here and soldiers are miserable creatures on shipboard, and I very much fear that unless I get the above (ordinary) seamen and not soldiers, there will be a dark spot in our Navy."¹⁰ Nevertheless, Macdonough found that he had to use soldiers if he was going to move his fleet.

During April, his three largest vessels went to Plattsburgh. Macdonough's own ship, the *President*, ran aground near Plattsburgh and required extensive repairs. In May, Midshipman Horace Sawyer was ordered to take a gunboat to Plattsburgh. When he entered the bay a sudden gust of wind upset it and it lay on its beam end. The crew clung to it for several hours in icy water before they were rescued by the sloop *Eagle*. Sawyer served on *Eagle* in its subsequent exploits.

Macdonough laid up his gunboats and transferred their crews to the *Growler* and the *Eagle*. Each vessel was equipped with eleven guns; the *Growler* was commanded by Lieutenant Smith and the *Eagle* by Sailing Master Loomis. They were sent to patrol the line to prevent British gunboat activity, but Smith was ordered to keep within his own lines. They got under way on June 2, and en route to his position he picked up Captain Herrick and his forty-one men at Champlain.

But the very next day, June 3, the over-eager Smith was unable to resist the flaunting of the British gunboats just over the line where the lake narrows into the Richelieu River. Early in the morning Smith signalled the *Eagle* to follow him. The pilot protested strongly, fearing the stiff south wind and the current in the river, but he was overruled. The two ships entered the river and as they approached Isle-aux-Noix ran into trouble.

Isle-aux-Noix was still primarily a military base. It was garrisoned by a detachment of Royal Artillery and six companies of the 100th Regiment under Major George Taylor. The three row galleys brought from Quebec the previous summer were manned by soldiers of the regiment. One galley carried an eighteen-pound carronade, the other two had twelve-pounders.

Each had a crew of about twenty-five and could be operated by sails as well as oars, drawing little water. They started firing on the nearer of the two American vessels. Taylor sent out two bateaux of troops and had one land on each side of the river, where there was also heavy artillery. The American ships, in trying to tack and turn, came close to shore in the narrow river. Many men were wounded and the rest were driven from their guns to find shelter. For four hours the sharp engagement continued. About eleven o'clock the *Eagle* received a twenty-four-pound shot between wind and water and sank in shallow water, the deck submerged a few inches; the British took possession. The *Growler* had its forestay and main boom shot away and, becoming unmanageable, ran around where Smith surrendered.

The British captured the crews of both ships, estimated at 100 men. None of the officers was wounded, but Midshipman Sawyer never recovered from the deafness brought on by the bombardment at close quarters. British sources list American casualties as one killed and nineteen wounded. Rodney Macdonough puts it somewhat less. The British sustained three injuries. British sources say that 108 of their men were engaged; Macdonough believes it was nearer 250. Lieutenant Macdonough later told Chauncey that "I am decidedly of the opinion that the vessels would not have been lost had they not gone so far over the line into such narrow water, where the musketry of the enemy told from either shore."¹¹ Meanwhile, rumors reached the British that more American ships and a three-thousand-man land force were on the way, and Taylor hurried back to Isle-aux-Noix to prepare for an attack which, of course, was never made or even considered.

After the war a court of inquiry into Smith's conduct was held at Sackets Harbor. The court found his general behavior "correct and meritorious," and although the ships were lost by going too far into the river, Smith had been deceived by his own pilot. It concluded that the boats "were gallantly defended and that they were not surrendered until all further resistance had become vain."¹²

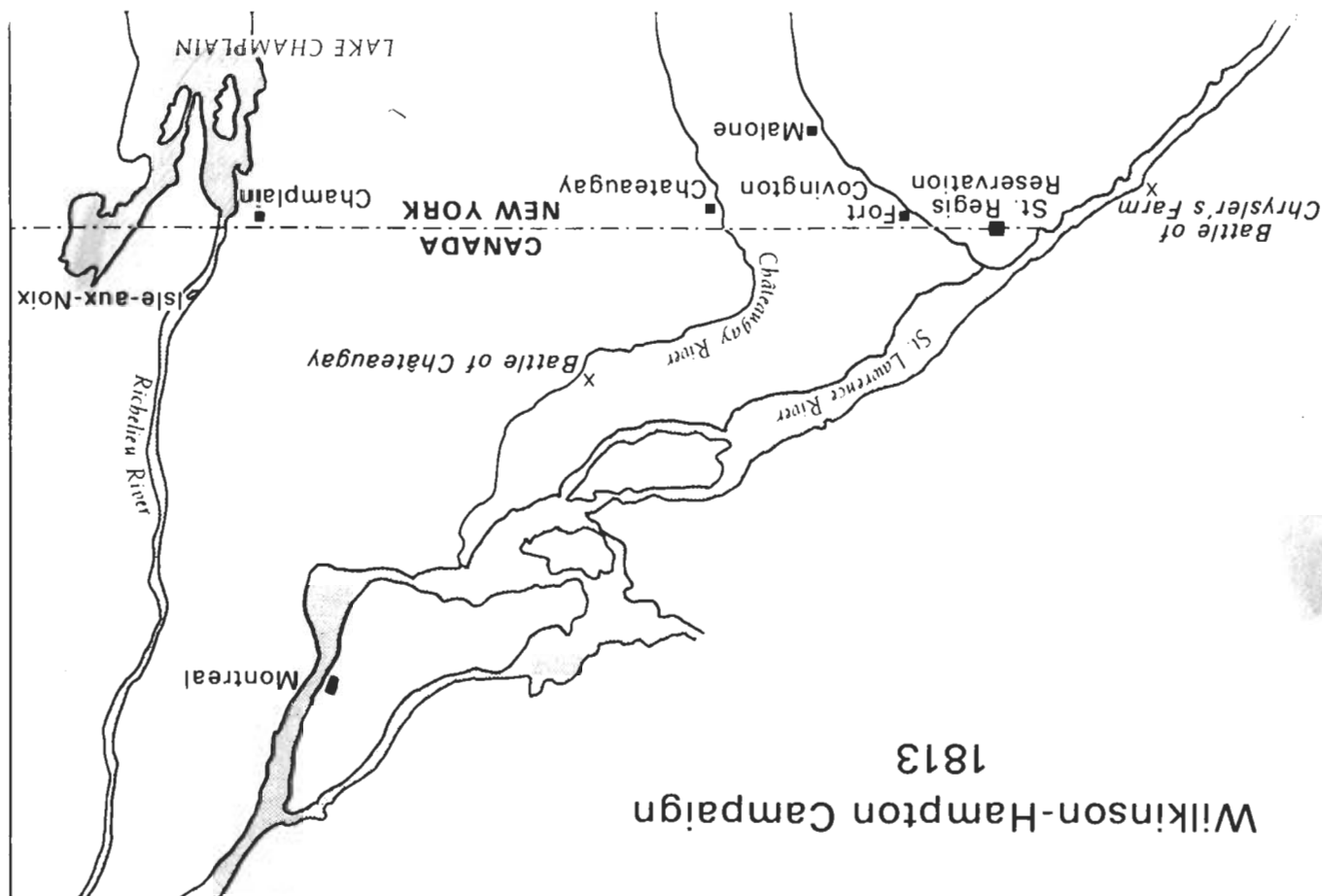
the main army had already retreated beyond that spot. He ordered the construction of a floating log bridge over which 100 men under Major Josiah Snelling crossed under fire and caught up with Hampton's rear, carrying the wounded with them. Most of Purdy's men forded the river and rejoined the army next day, although some of the fatigued and sick did not catch up with it until it reached Four Corners. Purdy later made an understandably bitter report of the action by accusing Hampton of being "under the influence of a too free use of spirituous liquors," of interference, and of "the capriciousness of his conduct and the total want of steadiness in his intentions."²²

Hampton remained at his base until October 28. He called a council of his officers and probably again heard what he wanted to: unanimously they favored withdrawal to save the army, and either go into winter quarters or prepare to fight elsewhere. Consequently, he marched his men back to Four Corners, beginning on the 28th and arriving on the 30th. The casualties of the expedition are still in dispute. Hampton said they were no more than fifty. Other knowledgeable sources give a range of from fifteen to seventy killed, twenty to thirty-three wounded, and sixteen to twenty-nine prisoners.²³

A torrent of dispatches flowed between Hampton, Wilkinson, and Armstrong during November. A complication in the smooth flow was caused by the departure of Armstrong from Sackets Harbor before the Wilkinson expedition got under way. On November 1, Wilkinson finally started out by boat, but he did not know until the 6th that Hampton had retreated. Thus he fatuously proposed a change of plans on the 1st for Hampton either to threaten faraway Chambly or join him at the confluence of the Grand and St. Lawrence rivers. On the same day Hampton sent Armstrong his second resignation, "when I can neither feel security nor expect honor." On the 4th he gave Armstrong his reasons for pulling back, including the scarcity of supplies and the coming of winter, which was producing sickness in his troops, but especially that he had been kept "dangerously in the dark" about Wilkinson's movements.²⁴

Meanwhile, Wilkinson was with great difficulty manoueuvering his eight-thousand-man army from Lake Ontario into the St. Lawrence, dodging British traps among the islands, and being subjected to fire from the shore. Yet on November 3, he asked Armstrong to notify Hampton of a new junction point (St. Regis), desiring Hampton to hear it from the secretary "as he has treated my authority with contempt, & has acted exclusively under your orders . . . that I may be saved the hazard of a second insult, for I need not say to you . . . that in this case my feelings shall be silenced, and that I will humiliate myself to make the most of this pretender."

On the 6th, when he learned of Hampton's retreat, Wilkinson wrote him direct that "I am destined to and determined on the attack of Montreal, if not

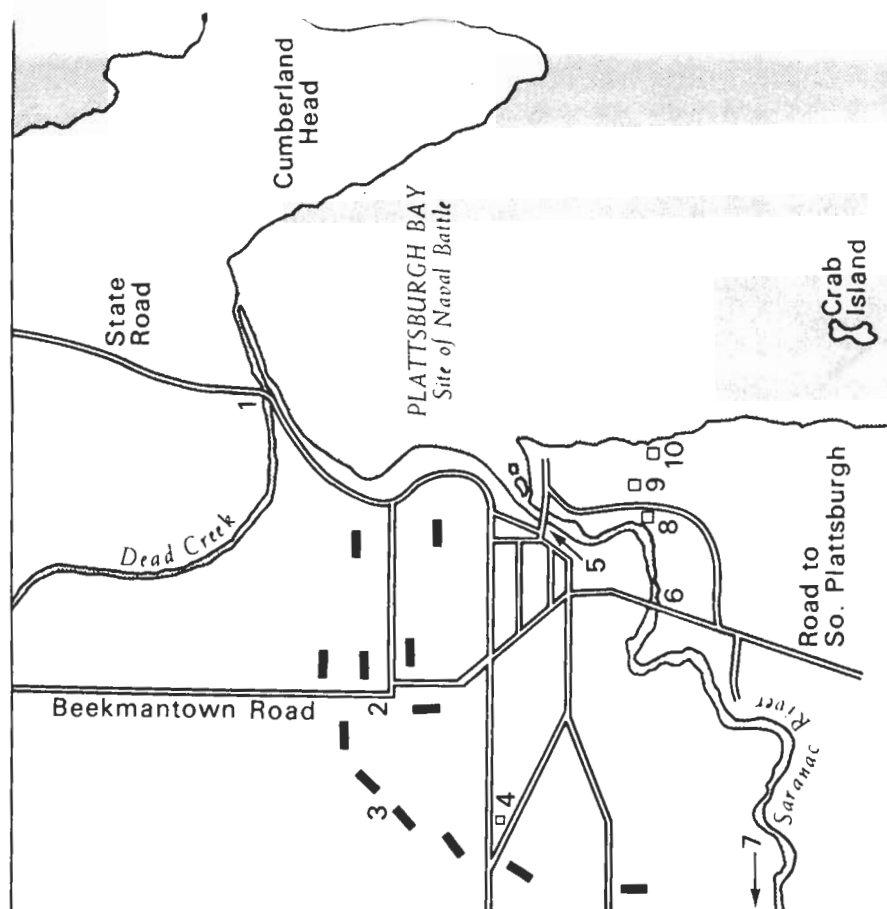


Meanwhile, the left wing had spent the night at Sampson's. The local commanders of a company of New York Dragons, Lieutenants Matthew Standish and Roswell Wait, dressed as British officers and reconnoitered within British lines. Returning to their unit, they led a charge against a picket guard which fled, but the whole army came alive. Otherwise, the night at Sampson's was uneventful, and on the 6th the army marched smoothly as far as Dead Creek. After sabotaging the roads, Appling had fallen back to join Sproull at the bridge. A storehouse and huts had been erected on the sand ridge between the creek and the lake, and there the two officers attempted to employ the delaying tactics that were being used on the right wing at Halsey's Corners.

On breaking through the barrier at the bridge, British troops were fired on by some of Macdonough's gunboats which had moved in close to shore. The gunboats were sent in hasty retreat, however, when the British brought some of their own artillery to bear, killing one American and wounding three including Lieutenant Silas Duncan of the *Saratoga*, who lost his right arm as a result. The British left and right wings joined forces somewhere near the modern intersection of Boynton Avenue and Route 9 in Plattsburgh, and started marching on the village, which they occupied as far as the Saranac River on the same day. All the American troops scrambled for the two bridges. The militia crossed the Upper (South Catherine Street) Bridge and tore up the flooring after all were across, using it as a breastwork. The Lower (Bridge Street) Bridge was a closer call. Removal of the flooring was done under severe fire, the workers covered by Aiken's company which took post in the sawmill above the bridge. The British were discouraged from crossing the river by bridge or ford by the vigilance of both regular and militia units along the south bank.

Most of Plattsburgh had fallen on the first day, but it had been a costly enterprise for the British. They lost three officers killed and several wounded, but their soldiers' casualties were about 100. The American losses totalled about forty-five.

That night Mooers, from his headquarters in South Plattsburgh, wrote to the governor in despair over the behavior of his men: "A portion of the militia have entailed an eternal disgrace on themselves, many of whom have left the ranks and gone home." In his division orders after the battle, he praised the work of some of the militia and of Aiken's company, but then: "The general regrets that there are some who are lost to patriotism and to honor, after coming forward in obedience to his call, fled at the first approach of the enemy, and afterwards basely disbanded themselves and returned home; thereby disgracing themselves, and furnishing to their fellow-soldiers an example of all that brave men detest and abhor." Macomb agreed in part with



PLATTSBURGH, September 6-11, 1814

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Dead Creek bridge | 6. Upper bridge |
| 2. Halsey's Corners | 7. Pike's Cantonment |
| 3. British encampment | 8. Fort Brown |
| 4. Prevost headquarters | 9. Fort Moreau |
| 5. Lower bridge | 10. Fort Scott |